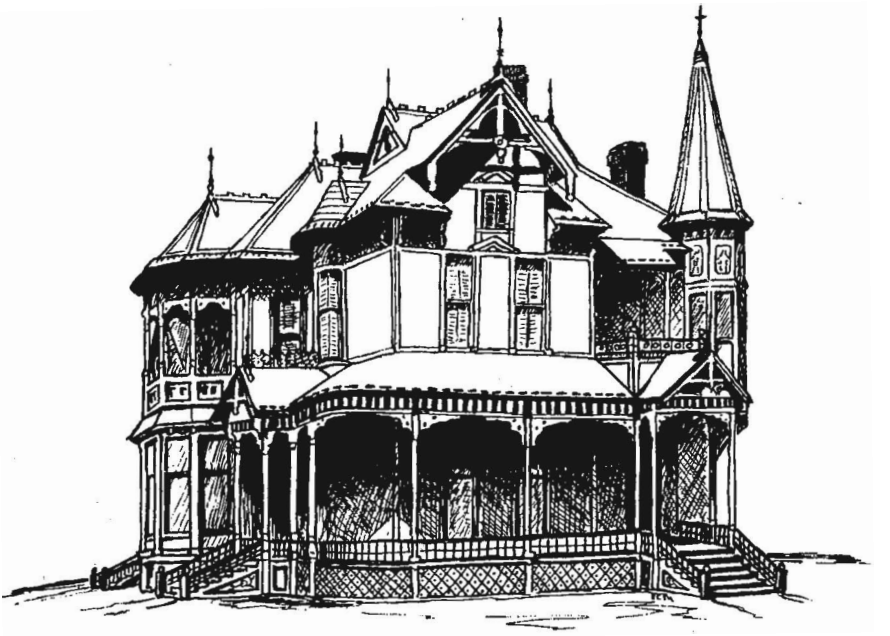


THE CASTLE ON DELAWARE HILL

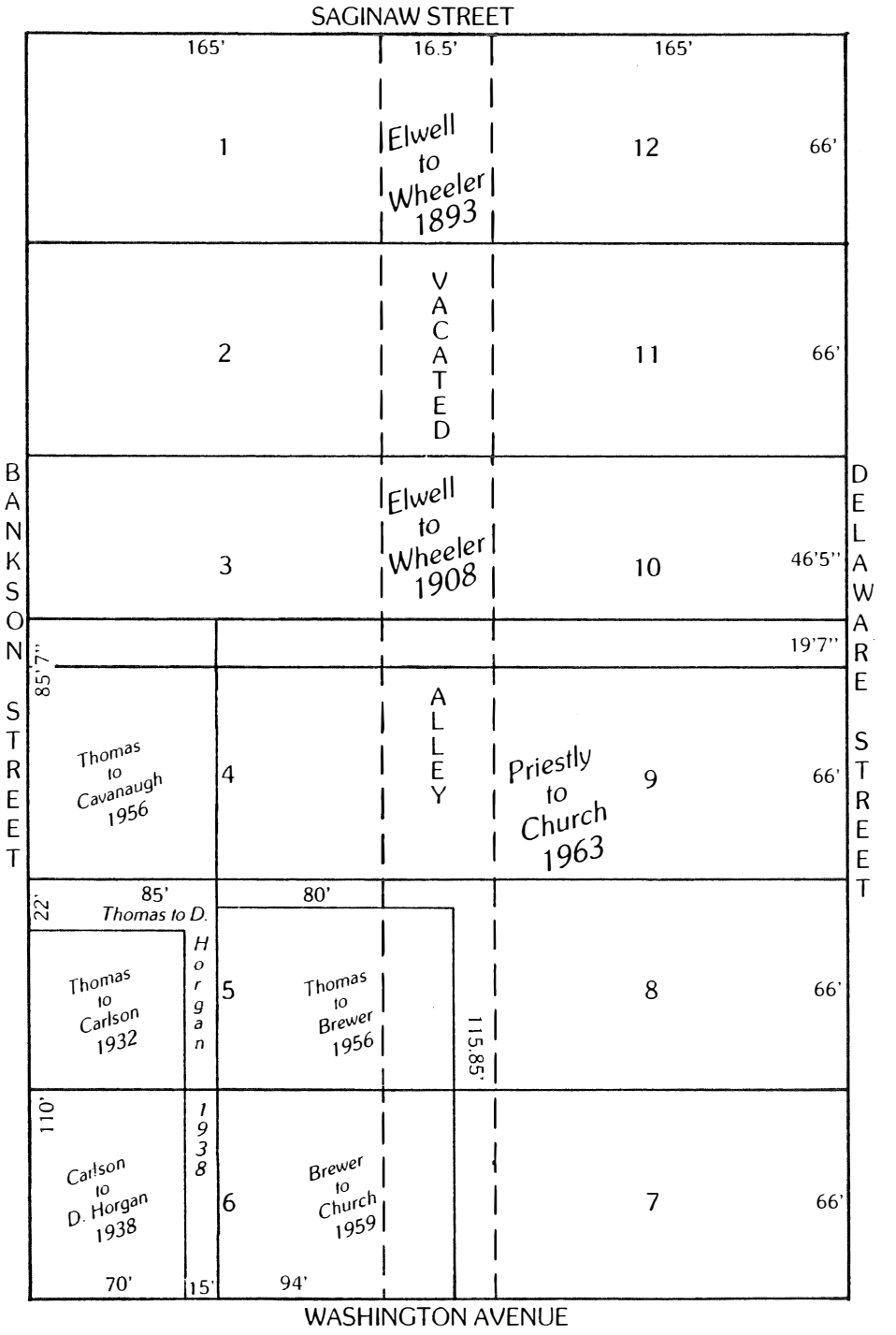
By
George Healy

The Castle on Delaware Hill

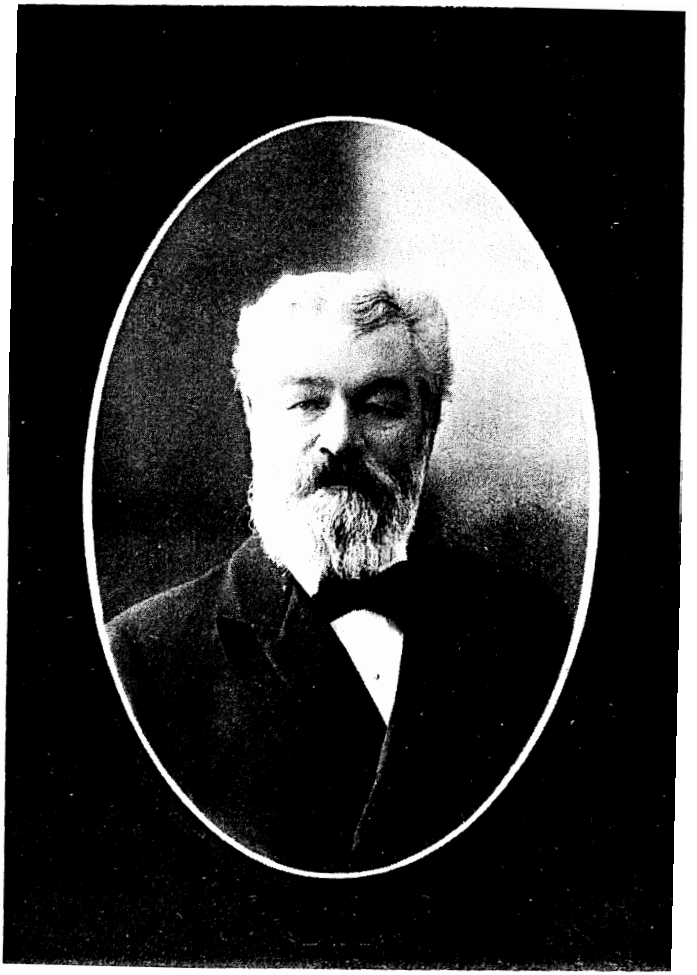
By George Healy

From Mill Street go west on Washington Avenue, Turn right on Delaware Street and stop! Look to your left. That magnificent castle and its carriage house is not just another home; it is the epitome of a man's dream. The finest craftsmanship installed the finest material behind those walls. For over a century it has remained a mystery. Come with me back through those years and learn of the heartaches, heartbreaks, intrigues, rumors, and enigmas that have taken place there, in the Castle on the Hill.

St. Louis, Michigan
1985


SAGINAW STREET
165'
16.5'
165'
1
Elwell to Wheeler 1893
12
66'
2
VACATED
11
66'
BANKSON STREET
3
Elwell to Wheeler 1908
10
46'5"
DELAWARE STREET
19'7"
85'7"
Thomas to Cavanaugh 1956
4
ALLEY
Priestly to Church 1963
9
66'
22'
85'
Thomas to D. Horgan 1938
80'
Thomas to Carlson 1932
5
Thomas to Brewer 1956
115.85'
8
66'
110'
Carlson to D. Horgan 1938
6
Brewer to Church 1959
7
66'
70'
15'
94'
WASHINGTON AVENUE

The man . . .



Colonel John A. Elwell

and . . .

his dream . . .

in Springtime

and in Winter
c. 1890

THE YEAR IS 1875

A very important event occurred that was to affect the history and landscape of St. Louis, Michigan. A retired financier from New York City moved there along with his family. Taking up residence in St. Louis were Colonel John A. Elwell, his lovely wife Catherine M. (affectionately called Kate), and his four lovely daughters: Elizabeth A., 15; Susan G., 14; Helen L., 12; and little Amelia E. -dubbed Amy- age 5.

Colonel Elwell had been born in Sweden in 1832. As a young man he migrated to New York City where he became very interested in the burgeoning lumber business. He made his vast fortune in New York, married Catherine Jenkins, and sired four daughters. Then, semi-retired at the age of 43, he moved his family to the small town of St. Louis.

One wonders why such a prominent business baron would leave New York City and move to a tiny lumbering village in the wilderness of central Michigan. The healing effects of the newly discovered magnetic mineral springs in St. Louis were being widely publicized across the country. People were flocking into St. Louis from many states to take the baths being offered at Holcomb and Evans' new bath house. As a sufferer from rheumatism, Elwell, too, sought relief in the healing waters.

The Colonel was a business man, however, and he leased the new Chicago, Saginaw & Canada Railroad that ran west from St. Louis and which had fallen into financial difficulties. He extended the line to Lakeview, and under his astute management the railroad began to show a profit. He was connected with the rail line until 1893 when it was sold to the Detroit, Lansing & Northern Rail Company. Later it became part of the Pere Marquette rail system.

John Elwell had been awarded the rank of Colonel for meritorious service in the Civil War. As he became more and more involved in the growth of St. Louis, he was called Colonel instead of John. He did much for the little lumber village on the Pine, and when the new Holcomb & Evans Addition was made, he bought many blocks of building sites. One such block was block 77 which included 12 building lots, bounded on the north side by Saginaw Street, on the south by Washington Avenue, on the west by Bankson Street, and on the east by Delaware Street. He decided to build his home facing east on lot 7, known as 103 North Delaware Street. It was the highest point on the block and the highest in that part of town.

Elwell sought the best contractor/builder available, a man by the name of Leach, who helped him design his "Castle." Leach utilized some of the designs in a smaller version of the Castle erected just two blocks north for the Charles family. But Elwell was building a far more elaborate house! All of the very best materials and workmanship went into perfecting this magnificent edifice, and magnificent it was and is! Today, more than a century later, with its bright coat of white paint, its bright green trim with green roof to match, it remains the most elegant and stately of mansions in the area.

The deed from Holcomb to Colonel Elwell covering block 77 was recorded April 22, 1880, and ground was broken immediately for the Castle and carriage house.

Several rumors speculate about where the Elwells lived from 1875 until the Castle was completed in 1884.

According to rumor number one, the Elwell family lived in a large two-story frame house on the northeast corner of Washington Avenue and Watson Street. This house was occupied later by a family named Whitney who ran a junk yard there during the 1920's and '30's.

Rumor number two suggests that the Elwells lived at the Park Hotel, but since the Park Hotel was not built until 1881, it must be assumed that if they lived in a hotel it was the old Exchange Hotel on the southeast corner of Mill Street and Washington Avenue. As many as six or seven hotels in St. Louis, as well as several rooming houses, accommodated the influx of people coming for the "baths."

Another rumor says that the Elwells possibly lived in the castle while completion was still going on. An article appearing in the St. Louis "Leader" in September 1881 reported that a worker named Robertson fell from a 30-foot-high scaffold at the Elwell residence. The article reported ". . . it knocked him senseless, but no bones were broken or damage done." Another article appearing on November 30, 1881 reported that the Colonel Elwell had "locked up his residence for the winter and moved his family to the Sanitarium." Evidently they were living in a house somewhere in St. Louis.

The Elwell "Castle" was finished in 1884, and the Colonel's family moved in. All of the lumber used in its construction had been hand-picked and inspected by the Colonel and Mr. Leach, and was native Michigan wood. The ceilings were all twelve feet high.

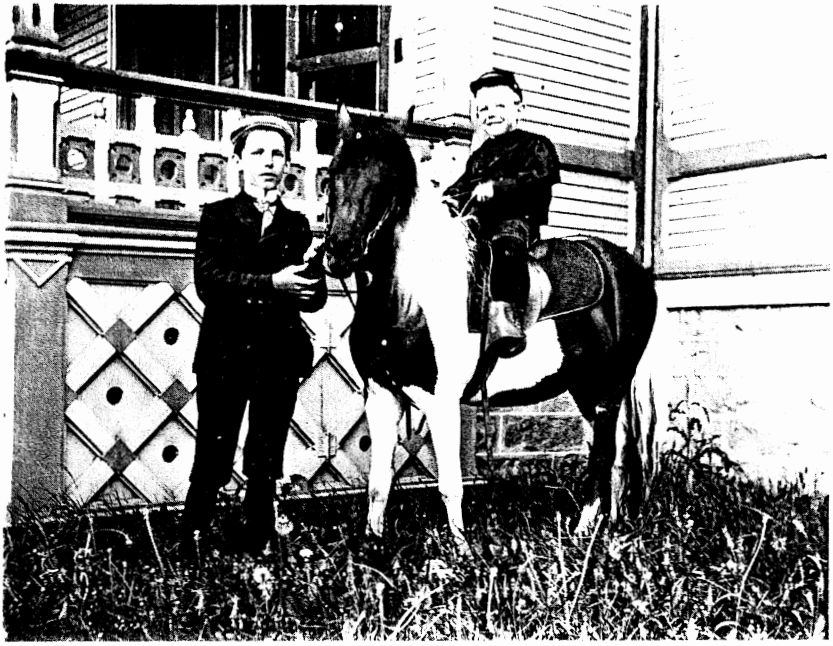
A beautiful two-story carriage house had been built on the spacious grounds, with stables to contain the family's fine carriages and horses, and with a comfortable apartment above for the hostler.

In the summertime, lawn parties were in vogue, and the Elwells' spacious grounds were the perfect setting for teas and soirees. The girls were young and beautiful and very popular.

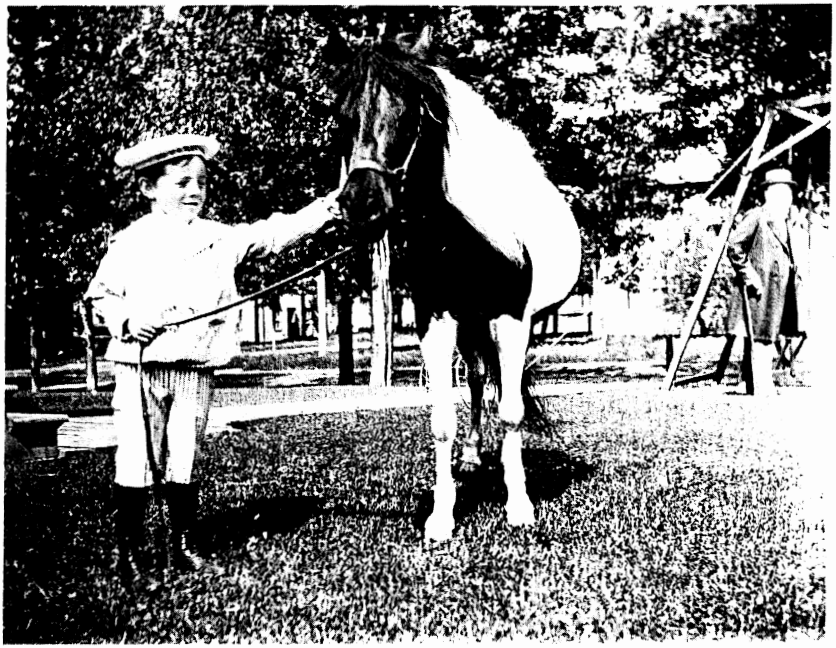
On November 19, 1890, Helen Elwell, the third daughter, married the popular young Dr. Aaron R. Wheeler of St. Louis. Colonel Elwell deeded lots 1, 2, 11 and 12 over to the Wheelers, and a large commodious house and barn were built just north of the Castle on the southwest corner of Delaware and Saginaw Streets. For many years these two beautiful homes and accompanying carriage houses were the sole structures on the entire square block.

On March 30, 1892, in a spectacular double wedding, the eldest daughter, Elizabeth, was united in marriage to William W. Collin, a lumber merchant from Greenville, Michigan, and the youngest daughter, Amy, was married to Edwin C. Crane, a clerk from Detroit.

To Elizabeth were born John Elwell Collin, William W. Collin Jr., and Louise P. Collin. To Amy was born a daughter, Margaret Crane. To Helen was born a son, Robert I. Wheeler in 1894. Amy's marriage to Edwin C. Crane ended in divorce sometime between 1892 and 1903 at which time she married Dr. Frank E. Farley, a teacher from Wesleyan College in Boston.



John Elwell Collin *William Collin, Jr.*
(c - 1900)



Robert I. Wheeler *(the Colonel in Background)*
(c - 1900)

During the years 1889 and 1890 Colonel Elwell served as president of the Village Council of St. Louis, and he dedicated much of his time and advice to developing the community. A truly handsome and aristocratic gentleman, he struck a very impressive picture striding about town immaculately dressed and with his full beard, his diamond shirt studs, and his gold-headed cane.

In March 1898 his beloved Catherine died at the age of 63. It is believed that at this time the Colonel lost all interest in his estate. He tried desperately to obtain civic permissions to bury her on the park-like grounds, and when the city council refused, he was heartbroken. She was interred at Oak Grove Cemetery in one of the best-located plots obtainable. The Elwell's second daughter, Susan, who was seriously retarded, became a problem which the Colonel was unable to cope with, so on February 14, 1899, he deeded his entire estate to St. Joseph's Retreat in Detroit, in consideration for the care of his daughter. He reserved a life estate in the property. After Susan Elwell died in 1902 at the age of 30, St. Joseph's Retreat deeded the property back to Colonel Elwell. The consideration was $4,000, presumably the cost of Susan's care. She was buried beside her mother at Oak Grove Cemetery.

After the death of his daughter, the Colonel lived on in the Castle in elegance and loneliness until February of 1906 when he sold his home to Frank G. and Helen L. Kneeland. It is not known where Colonel Elwell lived during the years from 1906 to his death in 1910 of cerebral hemorrhage. One rumor has it that he moved to a small house across the street on N. Delaware. It is more logical, however, to assume that he moved to the home of his daughter, Helen Wheeler, just north of the Castle.

In any event, he left most of the furnishings in the Castle, taking only his desk and a few more small pieces of furniture and his personal effects. We can also assume that the Colonel's fortune must have dwindled considerably, since he sold the entire parcel to the Kneeland's for $7,000.

From all appearances, when Colonel Elwell first purchased Block 44, he did so with a dream of building a large impressive home on three of its four corners for each of his daughters. The Castle was to be the permanent home of his retarded daughter Susan. When Helen married Dr. Aaron Wheeler, the first home was constructed. But when Elizabeth and Amy were married in 1892, something happened to his dream of keeping his family together in a compound on Block 77. Did the girls rebel against this idea? Why weren't their homes constructed on the remaining two corners? Were their bridegrooms unreceptive to the idea? We know Amy's marriage had become unstable. Still, Elizabeth later became very interested in real estate and was quite active in selling a good deal of her father's property. Evidently he had become "land-poor" as it was later to be known, for in 1906, when he sold the Castle to the Kneelands, the sale was subject to all liens for taxes since 1904!

The legal description of the property at that time was lots 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and the southerly 19 feet, seven inches of lots 3 and 10. Almost immediately, in February of 1906, the Kneelands deeded the property over to Emma O. Reed, exempting lots 4, 9, and the southerly 19 feet, 7 inches of lots 3 and 10. The price was $3,000 and included only the house and the first lot north and the two behind them to the west. From 1906 to 1909 the Kneelands and their children - Dorothea, Helen and Henry Tracy - resided in the Castle even though the title was in the name of Emma O. Reed

of Mason, Michigan. There are no records available to show if Emma O. Reed ever occupied the Castle, nor is any explanation given why she obtained title on the house and not on the carriage house.

In fact, Emma O. Reed is somewhat of a mystery. We do not know her marital status. Apparently she did not live in St. Louis, but she owned a tremendous amount of property in and around the town. In all the deeds concerning the castle, any places where her name appeared, they were obviously written by the same person, even when written in the acknowledgement by the notary public. This seems extremely unusual, but we must assume the lady did exist, although apparently she did not reside in the Castle. The Kneelands, therefore, lived in the Castle as paying tenants until 1909.

In July of 1908 the Kneelands deeded Lots 4 and 9 and the southerly portions of lots 3 and 10 to Mrs. Delia Barden of St. Louis. The price was $4,500. This property included the carriage house and driveway as well as the property behind it. This situation existed until January of 1909 when Emma O. Reed deeded lots 5, 6, 7, and 8 to Delia Barden. The price was again $3,000 for this property which included the house.

Castle on the Hill
(c. 1910)

Now we have the entire original parcel, with the exception of the Wheelers' lots, in the name of Delia Barden. One wonders why such a magnificent castle and grounds were sold for $7,000 in one transaction and $7,500 in another. Colonel Elwell undoubtedly sold to satisfy tax liens. One also wonders why Emma O. Reed bought the Castle and three lots for $3,000 in 1906 and sold the parcel three years later to Delia Barden for the same price, or why the Kneelands sold the barn, driveway and properties behind it to Delia Barden in 1908? Everything points to a real estate "squeeze play" on Emma O. Reed, or a big tax dodge among real estate promoters.

At any rate, we will never know, for the following year, in May 1910, Delia Barden deeded the entire estate to her daughter, Mrs. Lura Newman. The price - $1.00 and other valuable considerations!

Lura Barden Newman was married to Louis Frank Newman, a retired Detroit promoter. They had a 16-year-old son, Gwendell Barden Newman, a blond, blue-eyed boy who had grown up in Detroit and St. Louis.

The Newmans lived in a grand style, and so began the flamboyant age of the Castle on the Hill. According to recollections, the Newmans, whenever they appeared in public, were always dressed in clothing of the same color. They sported a fine line of thoroughbred riding horses, and as the car age arrived, they also sported a shining white Stanley Steamer touring car. Their driver and hostler at the time was an ex-fire chief of St. Louis named Roy McCall, who was the author's uncle and who provided many stories of the Newmans. My two older sisters, while walking home from school, quite often would hear a noise coming along the road in a cloud of dust. They would jump into the ditch until the car stopped alongside them and Uncle Roy would load them into the big Newman touring car for a ride home. It was quite a thrill!

Louis Newman was a high-living professional gambler who spent several months each year in the casinos at Monte Carlo where he was a "dealer." It was during their first years of residency in the Castle that a gambling room was installed in the southeast corner of the second floor. Many gambling sessions were held there with a sentry posted in the turret to warn of any "uninvited" guests - namely, the police.

Gwendell B. Newman

Taken from a painting hanging in the Cutler Memorial Library, St. Louis, Ml. Those of you who knew the young Billy Durham will be amazed at the remarkable resemblance.

(c - 1904)

Also during the Newmans' occupancy the walls were covered in French moire silk brought back by the Newmans on one of their European trips. Seeking someone to hang the silk, Mr. Newman called upon a neighbor, Elias Sutphin, for advice. Mr. Sutphin was adept at hanging wallpaper, but he refused to tackle the job of installing the silk without expert advice. Therefore, Mr. Newman brought a man over from Europe to consult with Mr. Sutphin, and together they decided to cover panels and then attach the panels to the walls. It was so expertly done that today, except for a bit of fading, the silk-covered walls are as beautiful as ever. The lower floor of the castle was covered with bottle-green French velvet carpeting.

In April of 1912, Louis F. Newman died at the Castle at the age of 54. He had not suffered any lengthy illness. Rumor has it he was attended by his doctor from Detroit. In any event, there was no public service, and the local undertaker reported later that he had never actually seen the body. The coffin had already been sealed when it was delivered to him for burial in Oak Grove Cemetery. Also, a man who had helped move the coffin to the grave, reported that it was really too light to contain a man's body. Then, too, a maid or servant working at the Castle reported that packed luggage stood outside Newman's door the night he died. But these were only rumors! A search of the county death records reveals that his death had been registered. The cause - cerebral hemorrhage. It did not reveal who signed the death certificate.

To further confuse matters, one can assume a man of his position would have been heavily insured, although no records indicate this. Certainly these rumors and assumptions, even perhaps with little basis, have cast an aura of mystery about the death of Louis F. Newman.

After Mr. Newman's death, Mrs. Newman, her son Gwendell, and her mother Delia Barden continued to live in the Castle from 1912 to 1918. Undoubtedly Newman's death brought changes in the pace of life in the Castle, but his survivors continued to live in the splendid style St. Louis citizens had come to expect. Lura Newman, dressed in white, rode her white horse through the streets of the west side, a vision of imposing stateliness. The house and grounds, as usual, were immaculately maintained. Mrs. Newman was always dressed, as was her mother, in the latest fashions of the day, and they made many trips to both the east and west coasts to shop for the latest styles.It is not known if the two ladies entertained at the Castle, but apparently they tended to be quite reclusive.

At the time of his father's death, Gwendell Newman was just 18 years old. He had been schooled in the east and had registered for officers training school in the United States Marine Corps. It isn't known if he served on active duty during the World War, but he obtained the rank of First Lieutenant.

In 1918 Lura Newman decided it was time to go to Paris. German armies were being pushed behind their own borders, and the end of World War I was in sight. Mrs. Newman made plans for a trip abroad, her first in several years. It is not known who her hostler was at the time, but rumor has it that he quit his position unexpectedly. According to the stories, the day before she was to leave for Europe, in a pique, she went to the stables and shot her horses, leaving instructions with her

mother to have them carted away. One can only assume she loved her horses too much to trust them to unknown hands.

Just prior to her departure for France she filed a deed, on September 6, 1918, leaving her entire estate to her son Gwendell. The consideration - $1.00 and other valuable considerations. Was this a premonition or simple precautionary measures regarding the conditions she would find in post-war Paris? Had Louis Newman really survived his "funeral" and managed to flee to the Europe he loved and knew so well? After all, St. Louis, Michigan, must have been rather mundane for him after the bright lights and high living at the casinos of Monte Carlo and the French Riviera.

And what of Lura Barden Newman? Not much is known about her. She was born in Detroit the second of two girls to Delia Barden. Her sister Josephine married a man named Donald Cameron. Josephine is buried in Oak Grove Cemetery beside her mother. Nothing is known of Mr. Barden or Mr. Cameron. Delia Barden had appeared in St. Louis sometime around 1900 with her daughter Lura, son-in-law Louis, and grandson Gwendell. She immediately began buying and selling real estate, eventually obtaining the Castle. In 1910 she had deeded the parcel to Lura.

Now in the fall of 1918 with Paris once more the "City of Lights," Lura found herself a beautiful, well-bred "widow," her beloved Louis in "heaven" - or Monte Carlo - lo, these six years. What was she thinking as she shot her beloved horses and deeded the Castle to her son just prior to boarding the boat for France? What were her thoughts? What were her plans?

Those plans went sadly awry, for, shortly after her arrival in Paris - whatever her adventures there - , she reportedly was killed. We do not know the cause of her death, but her ashes were shipped back to St. Louis and were placed in an ornate urn on the mantel in the living room of the Castle.

Delia Barden, having lost both daughter and son-in-law lived on in the Castle with her long-time housekeeper, Maggie Parks. Very few lights showed from the Castle at night, and very few appearances were made by Delia Barden or Maggie Parks.

Gwendell Newman was stationed in California, and he had become very intrigued by flying. In 1920 he purchased an aircraft and was determined to fly it home. Somewhere near Chicago he crashed the plane and was killed. His ashes were shipped to St. Louis to be placed on the living room mantel alongside his mother's. His grandmother received his effects through probate. A deeper pall fell over the Castle.

Shortly after Gwendell was killed, a beautiful young woman and her baby son appeared at the Castle and were immediately taken into the fold. Rumors flew! Word was given out that she had been Mrs. Newman's milliner from Florida and was a recent widow. Others said she had been Gwendell's girl friend, and her baby was Gwendell's illegitimate child. In any case, Elizabeth Durham and her baby son Billy lived on in the Castle with Mrs. Barden and Maggie Parks, and once again lights started burning at night.

Elizabeth Durham was but a spark compared to the flame of the late Lura Newman, but she started riding horses with a groom in attendance. The horses, however, were always rented from the armory in Alma. Gone were the old Newman stables! The author's family had just moved into St. Louis from the farm. I was four years old at the

time. We lived in a tiny house just one block south of the Castle on Delaware Street. It was a sight I will never forget - seeing women riding horses. There were always two ladies accompanied by a groom, and they all rode astride. We used to run after them and watch them dismount on the huge mounting block at the south door of the Castle.

As those early years passed, my mother was the housekeeper-cook at the home of Frances E. Burns on Center Street near Delaware. In the late afternoon I would go there and walk home with my mother after she had finished work in the early evening. We would walk up North Delaware, passing the Castle. My mother loved the Castle, and often she used to remark, "We should live there with our huge family!" (Seven children in all.) Often we would see Delia Barden in her long flowing dress, either walking in the park-like grounds or sitting in one of the three lawn swings scattered around the yard. She never failed to wave to us.

Early one evening when she waved at us, she beckoned us to come up to the swing. Often when we walked past the Castle in the early evening, my mother, who had been on her feet all day, removed her shoes and walked on the velvety cool lawn. When we were beckoned by Delia Barden, my mother was petrified! She quickly donned her shoes, and we walked up to the swing. Mother started to apologize for walking on the lawn, but Mrs. Barden, after inviting us to join her in the swing, would hear nothing of it. I can remember her words to this day - "My dear, I know you are Mrs. Burns' housekeeper-cook, and I know you are excellent in your cooking. I've sampled it on a few occasions when I have been a guest at the Burns' house. If my lawn or my swings can be a comfort to you on your way home, please feel free to use them at any time."

My mother had a nice chat with her, but we never sat in her swing again. My mother did, however, continue walking in her stockinged feet on the grassy terrace and, on occasion, visiting with Mrs. Barden.

During those days in the early '20's the grounds and their lawn swings became a favorite meeting place for young lovers from St. Louis. Many times, late at night, young couples were surprised by a white-haired lady with complexion to match, clad in a long, flowing pastel dress walking toward them across the lawn. Naturally they ran! They were trespassing. But was Delia Barden coming to scare them away, or was this gracious, lonely lady coming just to say, "Hello, young lovers"?

Billy Durham grew up in the Castle during the '20's, but somehow he failed to make lasting friends with the neighborhood kids. They were in awe of the terrific yard he had to play in as well as the fantastic barn and the largest wood pile they had ever seen! Only one or two of the neighborhood boys were close enough to have access to the Castle. I was one of them.

During the late '20's, Billy used to come after me on Saturday morning, and I would spend the day at the Castle. Sometime during the morning a monoplane would fly over, "buzz" the house, and resume flying to the airport in Alma. That was a signal for Elizabeth Durham, Billy and me to drive to Alma to pick up her boyfriend from Detroit, George B. Thomas, or as everybody called him, "Tommy". Back at the Castle, Tommy would always take us on a hike or just tell us a lot of stories. Once he carried a canoe on his back down to Washington Avenue bridge, put it into the

Pine, and took us downriver on a canoe trip. We paddled up to the dam, carried the canoe to the river below, and continued on down the river. He never failed to give us money and drive us to Alma on Saturday night and return to pick us up after the show at the Strand Theatre. Billy and I both adored Tommy.

We would arrive back at the Castle, where usually there was a small party in progress, always in the kitchen. Up we would go to Billy's room where I would spend the night. His room was like a huge cavern. The lights beside the twin beds never seemed to reach the ceiling or side walls. Once Billy showed me a double picture, each frame showing a blond-haired boy in a sailor suit holding an American flag. He told me one was a picture of him. They looked so much alike that I asked if the other was his father. He said, "No, the other one is Mrs. Barden's grandson, Gwendell Newman."

A painting of a similar picture hangs today in the Theodore Cutler Memorial Library in St. Louis. This portrait was purchased years later at an auction at the Castle by Robert L. Wilson of St. Louis who presented it to the library. It was restored by Dr. Richard Waggoner's son, Richard, and is entitled "Curly" because of the boy's long, golden ringlets. A close inspection, however, reveals a remarkable likeness to the young Billy Durham.

I was always envious that Billy was allowed to go anyplace he chose and do anything he wanted without ever having to ask permission. It always amazed me how he abused the housekeeper, Maggie Parks, who had a crippled leg. She never spoke to us much, but I remember she always prepared us a very nice breakfast or lunch. I never knew until years later that Maggie Parks was Delia Barden's niece.

Another item in the Castle that I became interested in was a huge broken airplane propeller which hung above the sideboard in the foyer. This was supposedly from the plane in which Gwendell Newman was killed.

Time passed, and I grew away from Billy. I learned from a friend that Billy's disposition had not improved over the years. Across the river on West Washington, north of the gravel pit - an area now known as Orchard Hills - were the "high banks." This was a fantastic place for swimming, and since none of the kids could afford a swimming suit, they all went "skinny-dipping." I learned to swim at the "high banks." Most of the neighborhood kids met there every Saturday in the summertime. Billy obviously was not one of them. But a few times the boys swimming would suddenly be startled by .22 caliber bullets landing all around them in the water. After a naked chase, they would catch teary-eyed Billy, who apologized. He didn't want to harm anyone; he just wanted some excitement and to be a part of living. In looking back over the years, I think Billy would have been a nice boy, but he was surrounded by genteel women, and I don't think he really knew who he was. Later, when Mrs. Barden died, her will would reveal that Billy's middle name was actually Gwendell, and that she had adopted him as her son. Billy was actually born of blue blood, but he just never had a chance.

In 1929 Delia Barden died, her will naming Maggie Parks and others as beneficiaries. Maggie received a $10,000 trust fund, the proceeds of which were to be given to her at the rate of $600 per year. The will further stated that whatever funds were left after Mrs. Barden's funeral expenses were paid would be divided

between her adopted son, William Gwendell Durham, and his mother, Elizabeth Durham. Also, Billy would receive a $5,000 trust fund with his mother as the administratrix. The provisions of the will brought the entire Castle property under the supervision of Elizabeth Durham and Billy.

During probate proceedings, Elizabeth Durham submitted a bill for the care of Delia Barden in the amount of $25,000 for medicine and time expended. The Barden estate, however, had dwindled somewhat, and it is thought that Elizabeth received the equivalent of $15,000, that being full title to the Castle and $5,000 in cash. It is also thought that this completely wiped out several bequests to distant relatives and friends whom Delia Barden had named in her will.

It isn't known what eventually happened to Maggie Parks. The only record at the Gratiot County court house reveals that a Maggie Parks died in 1933 in Traverse City. No address was given. Why would a death in Traverse City be recorded in Gratiot County?

In 1928 or 1929 the City of Alma had a big air show at the airport on Begole Road. Everybody from miles around attended. Prominent among the spectators were George Thomas and Elizabeth Durham. They did a lot of flying in his monoplane and took many passengers up between the aerial stunts sponsored by the airport. That was the first time I had ever seen a plane fly continuously upside down. I was positive they would never come down! When they did, Elizabeth loaded all the stunt flyers into her car and took them to lunch. I believe she had housed most of them in the Castle the night before.

In 1931, Elizabeth Durham and George B. Thomas were married in Mt. Pleasant. From all appearances they did not live together too long. Apparently they moved to Detroit, and Billy went with them. The Castle became a weekend home. It was rumored that on one particular weekend Billy decided to come "home" and took a taxi from Detroit to St. Louis. His mother had to pay for it, and she was furious!

According to the St. Louis School records, a Billy "B." Durham was entered into the school system on January 2, 1927. We do not know why he entered in the middle of the school year. He was enrolled by his mother, Elizabeth Durham; his father's name was not given. His birthdate - 1920; his birthplace - Miami Beach, Florida He left the school system in June 1931, having completed, perhaps, the sixth grade. That is the last record available of him in St. Louis but not the last story of him. His mother had just married, so perhaps he entered the Detroit school system in the fall of 1931. Maybe he was privately tutored. In any case, he must have received the rest of his education in or around Detroit.

In 1933, back in St. Louis, Elizabeth Durham Thomas decided to convert her barn into a beer garden. She applied for and received a license to open a cabaret-style night club in the carriage house. It was called "Betty's Barn," and a bright red neon sign was installed on the front of the building to that effect! She hired a neighborhood girl for a waitress and a 17-year-old boy for a bouncer. How she obtained a license to open is a mystery, but soon all the city fathers were meeting there at night. Not only the city fathers sought recreation at the "Barn," but also roustabouts from the new Porter oil field came into town on Saturday nights to sample the joys of "Betty's Barn." And, as might be expected, single girls from Alma and St. Louis showed up

for dancing. Soon a small orchestra was hired, and "Betty's Barn" became quite a night spot. Furthermore, the many rooms in the Castle provided more private trysts for the guests at the "Barn."

"Betty's Barn" was quite short-lived, however, because the city's mothers soon put their feet down, literally, and the "Barn" became a thing of the past. I was underage at the time, but I was smuggled in one night and seated on the upper balcony. This particular night was a week-night, and "Betty" was seated at a huge round table at the southwest corner of the room, She was surrounded by some of the prominent men of the town, and they were talking. I recognized most of them. It seemed a spotlight of some sort centered on the table. On Elizabeth! Her golden hair seemed to glow. We were hustled through to the stairs going up to the balcony. I'm sure she was aware of us, but she made no effort to stop us. I never did care much for beer, but the thrill of being in a real "cabaret" illegally made it taste like "nectar of the gods." One or two couples were dancing, but Elizabeth never left the table. She reigned like a queen! Of course, our fear of being discovered caused us to remain only a short time, but the experience remains etched in my memory.

"Betty's Barn" died along with the other traditions of St. Louis. The red neon sign came down, and the carriage house no longer resounded with music and revelings. Of course, the "Barn" never should have happened in the first place in such a strictly residential area, but it added another episode to the saga of the stately Castle and its occupants.

During the 1930's Elizabeth Durham Thomas and Billy received the balance of the trust fund set up for Maggie Parks in Delia Barden's will, an amount estimated at $8,500.

The 1940's must have been a terrific hardship for Elizabeth and Billy because funds were not coming in. She had already sold a portion of the property, lot 5 on the corner of Bankson Street and Washington Avenue, to Martha Carlson, who immediately built a small, beautiful brick home there.

The 1940's and early 1950's offer very little information on the Castle and its inhabitants. Rumors have it that many prominent men of the area were seen going in and coming out of the Castle. Among those who frequented the house during the late 1930's and the 1940's was an elderly man named William Fitzgerald. He was originally from Alma but during the 1940's lived on one of the streets north of the Castle. Neighbors report that he called daily at the Castle. Desperate for funds, Elizabeth Durham Thomas borrowed money from Fitzgerald on at least three occasions: $2,025 in October 1940; $400 in November 1941, and $500 in November 1944. As a result, Fitzgerald held a mortgage on the Castle and the property, and after his demise, his heirs moved to foreclose.

During these times Elizabeth tried various ways to make money. Rumors were she rented some of the rooms to various men, and once she installed a sign on Washington Avenue calling the house the "Castle Hotel." But the sign remained only a short time before she was forced to remove it. After all, there was only one bathroom for each floor.

Elizabeth Durham Thomas! What was her life story? What mysteries lurked behind the scenes, unknown to St. Louis citizens and unknown to history? She was a tall,

large-boned woman who had a fierce compassion for animals. It almost seemed she could talk to them. She was blond and attractive. From all appearances her love of money outweighed her love of material things. Did her marriage to George Thomas fail? Evidently he was a man of means, since he owned his own private plane. What happened to him during the 1950's when she so desperately tried to raise money? There are rumors to the effect that she operated houses of prostitution both in Detroit and Miami Beach. The only bit of information which lends credence to the rumor is the recollection of a woman who operated a ladies dress shop in St. Louis. Elizabeth purchased a great many dresses in varying sizes to be shipped to her "girls" in Florida.

If much is a mystery about Elizabeth, no one knows what became of Tommy. Nor are any records available revealing what happened to Billy. An old clipping from the Detroit "Free Press" reported a young man coming into the police station one night to give himself up! He said his name was William Gwendell Durham and that he had murdered two women and had disposed of their bodies. His mother was called and came to the station immediately to get him. She said he had suffered a nervous breakdown recently and had become an avid reader of "True Detective Magazine." He was released into her care. Nothing more was ever heard of that situation.

Billy did not serve in the armed forces. Sometime in these years he married a girl from Detroit and brought her to St. Louis to live in the Castle. They raised two children. Billy apparently became a "flower child" of the '50's and later a "hippy" of the '60's. During the years he lived there, the Castle suffered a big transition. Woodwork was neglected or damaged. Elizabeth often reported thefts from the Castle, and at these times neighborhood boys were often brought in and questioned, but they were always released. It was assumed by St. Louis locals that Billy was gradually stripping the Castle of its beautiful accoutrements and selling them for his own financial benefit. It is believed that Elizabeth also maintained a home in Florida and spent considerable time there after Billy's marriage.

There are also reports that during this time Billy became quite obsessed with his .22 caliber gun. According to hearsay, he fired on a police car from his second story balcony.

Once Billy brought to the Castle an Alma girl with whom he wished to co-habit. His pregnant wife could not agree to this proposal and in the ensuing fracas was chased from the house by an angry Billy who brandished a kitchen knife. No one knows the outcome of that escapade.

In early October 1954, Elizabeth Durham Thomas mortgaged the remainder of the estate for $11,000. The mortgagee was a single man named Edward L. Warren whose address at the time was the same as hers, 103 North Delaware. He later recalled to friends that as he was walking past the Castle one day, Elizabeth came out to him with two quarts of strawberries. She told him that if he would come in she would make him a strawberry shortcake. He did - and stayed two years at a cost of $15,000 or more.

In November 1955, Edward L. Warren released from mortgage the east 80 feet of lot 6 and the easterly 80 feet of the southerly 49 feet, 85 inches of lot 5. In April

1956, Elizabeth sold the parcel to Thomas Brewer. Mr. Brewer had recently sold the old Wheeler home just north of the Castle.

In January 1956, Edward L. Warren, still of 103 N. Delaware Street, released the westerly 85 feet of lot 4 and the westerly 85 feet of the southerly 19 feet, 7 inches of lot 3 from mortgage. Elizabeth immediately sold that portion of the property to Thomas Cavanaugh.

In February 1956 the remainder of the entire estate was sold by sheriff's sale to the mortgagee, Edward L. Warren. The amount of sale - $12,138.09. The mortgage had not run its full two years, so it must be assumed that Elizabeth Durham Thomas had missed all her payments. Prior to the date of the sheriff's deed, Edward L. Warren paid off the Fitzgerald claim and was given clear title to the Castle in a deed recorded August 12, 1957.

On March 30, 1957, Elizabeth Durham Thomas held an auction sale in the castle. Reportedly she was drinking and smoking throughout the auction. Many antiques and relics were sold that day, and the sale ran until 2 or 3 a.m. with Elizabeth quite intoxicated by the end. She had started to remove a good many of the wooden shutters from the second floor, but apparently nobody was interested in buying them. Fortunately they were stored in the carriage house and have been restored and re-installed in the Castle. Their sale, of course, would have been illegal, for a deed had already passed to Edward L. Warren, and the shutters were affixed at the time. It is assumed that Elizabeth was still on friendly terms with Mr. Warren, even though he had moved out of the Castle and was living with friends James and Belle Priestly on South Pine Street. After her eviction from the Castle, she sought refuge for a short time in a small rented house in Alma.

In August 1957, Orville L. Church and Naoma L. Church, his wife, contracted with Edward L. Warren to buy the Castle and remaining estate. In 1959, the Churches purchased the property, originally sold to Thomas Brewer in 1956, by Elizabeth Durham. On January 15, 1961, Edward L. Warren died at his home at 108 South Pine Street of heart failure. His estate passed on to Mrs. Belle R. Priestly. In January of 1963, James Priestly and Belle R. Priestly of St. Louis deeded the property to Orville L. and Naoma L. Church. This parcel is what is now intact of Colonel Elwell's original purchase of Block 77 of the Holcomb and Evans Addition to the City of St. Louis - Lots 7, 8, 9, and southerly 19 feet, 7 inches of the easterly 80 feet of Lot 3, and the easterly 80 feet of Lots 4, 5, and 6.

The year is 1984, a century after the Elwells moved into the newly finished Castle.

I drive up the circular drive at 103 North Delaware Street. I notice it is still the brick drive of old. A bit of nostalgia hits me as I pass the carriage house and stop near the back porch of the Castle. Orville and Naoma Church have graciously consented to see me and show me their masterpiece!

I walk around to the Delaware Street entrance, mount the steps, and ring the bell. As I wait, I examine the tall, ornate double doors, expecting one of them to open. I'm nervous. Perhaps the bell doesn't work. There is no answer, so I walk around to the Washington Avenue side. Gone are the steps that led up to the porch outside Colonel Elwell's office. I continue around the house to the rear entrance, the one I used to enter with Billy Durham.

I knock. Orville Church opens the door, and I apologize for using the rear entrance. We shake hands, and I am ushered into the parlor. It's hard for me to talk. I am overwhelmed. I did not expect to step back into the last century. But I did!

At first glance, it seems the parlor is over-furnished; then I'm shown a picture of the room as it looked when the Kneelands lived there. The room has been restored and furnished almost exactly as it appeared at the turn of the century. The walls of the parlor and living room are hung in dark green French moire silk. Some of the pictures adorning the walls are the ones that hung there during the Elwell era. Here is a rocking-chair and there an arm chair from the original Castle furnishings. Dominating the center of the parlor is a huge round display table with glass top. This contains a collection of various rocks and shells. Mr. Church informs me they purchased this in Arizona.

After explaining to Mr. Church exactly what I am trying to accomplish in telling the story of the Castle, he says we will begin our tour on the second floor. Crossing the foyer to the stairs, I notice that the old broken propeller from Gwendell Newman's plane is gone, but looking closely I can still see its imprint in the old rose-colored French moire silk wall-covering. Sitting in the corner is a beautiful mahogany armchair with a leather, buttoned-on seat. Mr. Church says it is Colonel Elwell's chair and had been built especially for him. Since the Colonel was stout and short, the seat was lower and wider than that of a normal armchair. Directly under the seat was an immense drawer for storage.

The door lintels and door jambs as well as part of the stairway are of butternut wood with varying hand-carved designs of flowers and fruit. The railing of the staircase is mahogany. Transoms and some of the windows are done in stained glass imported from Bohemia or Italy.

As we mount the stairs, we arrive at a landing connected to the turret. I ask about the windows in the turret and am told they now have a protective covering of plexiglas to preserve the remaining stained glass. It seems vandals, or perhaps Billy Durham, had shot out some of the glass. Also, a bullet hole was found in one of the parlor windows, but since this was the original imported glass, the Churches decided to leave it.

We continue up the stairs to the great hall. Here the floors are covered in bottle-green French velvet carpeting. Mr. Church explains that it had previously covered the first floor, but during the Durham-Thomas occupancy it had suffered innumerable cigarette burns. The Churches had it taken up and removed to the second floor. Here and there are pieces of furniture from the Elwell regime such as side chairs and small tables as well as pictures together with authentic pieces of that era, searched for and purchased by the Churches for the Castle.

We enter the southeast corner room, and Mr. Church tells me this was Louis Newman's gambling room. The huge chandelier shown down on the gaming table where weekly gambling sessions took place. In the corner of this room stands the original small cabinet where the gaming chips and monies were kept. A settee stands at the side; it originally came from the Elwell Castle.

There are six rooms and two great halls on the second floor. Each room is furnished in turn-of-the-century furniture assembled by the Churches through

numerous estate auctions and private sales. In the gambling room stands a beautiful bed that won a $500 prize at the International Fair in New York City. Somehow the Churches hunted it down and purchased it for the Castle.

I hardly recognize Billy's room where I used to stay. Gone are the twin beds that were more or less considered modern in the '20's. Now a double bed with a high ornate headboard dominates the room. It looks so much better and in keeping with the rest of the decor.

We do not climb to the third floor, but Mr. Church describes the complex cistern arrangement above us. The eaves drained rainwater into a lead-lined cistern. The water then went through several steps of purification and eventually, pure enough to drink, through pipes to the floors below. Colonel Elwell was far ahead of his time in planning for running water in his Castle. The system was blocked off years ago, however, with the lead and copper torn out and sold by Billy Durham in the '40's.

We continue our tour of the rest of the rooms on the second floor. I see Elizabeth Durham's room and Maggie Parks's room. When I spent time in the Castle, they had been furnished with modern pieces. Now they have been restored with turn-of-the-century pieces, and the walls have been papered with corresponding designs.

The upstairs bedrooms in the Castle have been wall-papered by the Churches in designs favorable to the era. The hallway, of course, is French silk wall-covering, which has been painstakingly restored.

Mr. Church points out where the two huge heating stoves stood in the hallway, front and rear. The floor, which was about 12 inches thick, contains a layer of slate, except for the center of the long hallway where a series of pipes were run to bring gas to the different bedrooms. This access was utilized later to bring electrical outlets into the bedrooms.

Colonel Elwell's bedroom, directly above the dining room, contains a fireplace. The Colonel, however, spent many nights in a tiny room on the first floor adjacent to his office. Mr. Church will show me this room, and we descend to the first floor. The small room is on the southwest corner of the Castle and had an entrance on Washington Avenue with steps down to the the mounting block where the Colonel would enter his carriage. His office now has become the master bedroom. The room where he used to sleep just off his office is now a bathroom furnished with antique fixtures.

There are five Italian marble fireplaces in the Castle; one each in the foyer, the living room, the dining room, the master bedroom upstairs, and the Colonel's office downstairs. The windows in the Castle are all quarter-inch-thick plate glass imported from France because America lacked the necessary glass-making process.

The parlor contains many pictures and paintings that were originally in the Castle. One that stands out is a chrome lithograph entitled "Sweet Charity" given by Elizabeth Durham to Dr. Richard Waggoner in payment for a $450 medical bill. Mrs. Doris Waggoner very graciously presented it to the Churches at their open house in May of 1963.

An interesting point has arisen here. The Kneelands - Frank and Helen and their children Dorothea, Helen and Tracy - were residents of the Castle for at least three or

four years. After their move to Ann Arbor where Dorothea was in college, they returned to St. Louis, settling in a house on the corner of Pine and Washington, known as 303 West Washington Avenue. Later this same house was occupied by young Richard and Doris Waggoner. He was the principal of St. Louis schools, and she taught music there. Later he became a medical doctor, which is how St. Louis remembers him.

Now Mr. Church introduces me to his wife. She is so gracious and shows me photos found in the attic of the Wheeler home. One photo shows an older boy holding a Shetland pony with a smaller boy on its back. I determine this must be Colonel Elwell's first two grandsons: the oldest, John Elwell Collin and his younger brother, William Collin Jr. Another photo shows a younger child on the same pony. This must be Robert Wheeler Jr., the third grandson.

I did not go into the basement. There are seven rooms there. However, I did ask the Churches if they had ever seen evidence of an underground tunnel from the house to the barn. It was rumored that Colonel Elwell's Castle had been a stage in the underground railroad. Of course, the slaves had all been freed for more than fifteen years before construction of the Castle began. As a kid, along with Billy Durham, I had searched for this tunnel, but, alas, this was a figment of someone's imagination, the same as the mystery of the strange red lights shining from the third floor of the Castle late at night during the '20's and early '30's.

We know that the three Elwell girls, Elizabeth, Helen and Amy were married at the Castle. We know nothing about the Kneeland girls' marriages. But since the Churches have been in residence, their four daughters, Joan, Carol, Sharron and Colleen have been married in the Castle. Guests have been seated in the parlor. The altar has been arranged in front of the fireplace in the living room. Mr. Church has waited as each of the lovely brides has descended that beautiful stairway. Then the walk to the altar. Close your eyes - you can picture it now! The Churches in 1984, have nineteen grandchildren!

The first floor of the Castle is really awe-inspiring. Here again, are many pieces of furniture from the time of the Elwells. Some were acquired from Dorothea Kneeland Tufts whom Mrs. Church had the good fortune to know. The dining table, the Colonel's armchair, a bed, dresser, commode, love seat, several chairs including a fine oak rocker, and several pictures came from Mrs. Tufts. Walking through the first floor rooms, one simply cannot absorb the many pieces of furniture, paintings, beautiful chandeliers, and gleaming woodwork.

Mr. Church explains that the dining room walls were covered in heavy Italian tapestry. Unfortunately, Elizabeth Durham Thomas removed this tapestry at the time of her eviction. This infuriated Frank Warren to such an extent that a warrant for her arrest was sent out. The results of this episode, however, have been lost in the records, and the fabric ended up in a Detroit auction house. When the Churches learned of this they immediately drove to Detroit, but, alas, too late! Elizabeth had reclaimed the fabric and taken it to Florida with her. The dining room today is hung in a heavy vinyl fabric with a scenic design. Here, too, stands Colonel Elwell's dining table and chairs. The table appears round, but it can be extended the entire length of the dining room. I'm shown one of the leaves for it. It must be at least two inches

thick with wooden slides to enable it to fit tightly into corresponding slots. No round pegs to snap off on these table leaves! Mrs. Church points out that the table and chairs are a bit lower than normal height. Colonel Elwell was not a very tall man, and he had it made to his specifications. I am shown the double butler's pantry where food may be passed through from kitchen to dining room.

The kitchen! Gone is the shiny, old cooking range. The Churches have installed a long eating bar with a gas stove-top at the far end. A baking oven has also been installed in the south wall. Still, there is plenty of room for a large round oak table and chairs in the northern end. Mr. Church shows me a piece of the molding that tops the wainscoting along the wall. It has a detachable ridge, enabling the screws holding the molding to be countersunk and the ridge snapped back on, hiding all screw or nail holes. Along the south wall are two doors, one leading to another huge pantry and the other to the back stairs.

Suddenly I realize I've spent hours here. I've been so wrapped up in my tour and the intriguing conversations with the Churches that I have failed to notice the passage of time. As I bid them good-bye I realize that being so absorbed by the Castle, I've taken very few notes. I drive on around the circular drive and see the huge mounting block ensconced in the park-like grounds. Was this the block from the Washington Avenue entrance, or was it from the front entrance on Delaware Street? I notice also the mulberry bush in the middle of the circle drive - now a tree! I can visualize the young Elwell girls singing, "Here we go 'round the mulberry bush." I drive out onto Delaware Street and head home.

ASHES TO ASHES

During the last ten years of her life, Delia Barden kept the ashes of her daughter, Lura Newman, and of her grandson, Gwendell Barden Newman, in ornate urns on the mantle of the living-room fireplace in the Castle. After her death in 1928, both urns mysteriously disappeared. A check of cemetery records reveals that only three graves have been opened in the family plot in Oak Grove Cemetery - those of Delia Barden, Josephine Cameron, and Louis Newman. There are no set rules or laws covering the disposal of human ashes, thereby making them almost impossible to trace. Were they interred with Delia Barden? Were they subsequently scattered on the Barden plot, or were they buried on the Castle grounds? Over half a century later there are these unanswered questions.

And further spectulations endure. Each Memorial Day in Oak Grove Cemetery a small American flag is placed on the "grave" of former serviceman Gwendell Newman. A few paces away a similar flag adorns the grave of Civil War veteran Colonel John Elwell. Had the young Newman and the elderly Elwell ever met? Yet the Castle at sometime in its history was home to each. Would the history of the Castle have been written differently had the plane of Gwendell Newman not crashed on that cold, misty morning in 1920? After all, he would have been 90 years old in 1984.

"What might have been?" It is an intriguing, though fruitless, exercise in guessing. The wonderment, the nostalgia - these must satisfy. And perhaps they will when one considers the strange relationships and mysterious events that have shaped the history of that imposing edifice - that culmination of a dream - Colonel Elwell's magnificent Castle on the Hill.

EPILOGUE

Colonel John A. Elwell	1832-1910	Oak Grove Cemetery
Catherine (Kate) Elwell	1836-1898	Oak Grove Cemetery
Susan G. Elwell	1861-1902	Oak Grove Cemetery
Amy Elwell Farley	1869-1941	Oak Grove Cemetery
Frank E. Farley	1868-1943	Oak Grove Cemetery
Edwin C. Crane	Unknown	
Helen Elwell Wheeler	1863-1941	Oak Grove Cemetery
Dr. Aaron Wheeler	1856-1926	Oak Grove Cemetery
Elizabeth Elwell Collin	Unknown	
William T. Collin	Unknown	
John Elwell Collin	1881-1912	Oak Grove Cemetery

Frank G. Kneeland	1853-1916	Oak Grove Cemetery
Helen L. Kneeland Sr.	1862-1943	Oak Grove Cemetery
Dorothea Kneeland Tufts	1887-1975	Oak Grove Cemetery
Henry Tracy Kneeland		Last known - Bloomfield, Conn.
Helen Kneeland	Unknown	

Delia Barden	-1929	Oak Grove Cemetery
Lura Newman	1866-1918	Oak Grove Cemetery (?)
Louis F. Newman	1858-1912	Oak Grove Cemetery
Gwendell Barden Newman	1894-1920	Oak Grove Cemetery (?)
Maggie Parks	Unknown	
George B. Thomas	Unknown	
Elizabeth Durham Thomas	1888-1971	Southern Memorial Park, Miami, Florida
William Gwendell Durham	1920-?	Last known - Miami, Florida

SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

Naoma and Orville Church
David McMacken
Helen Brainerd
Vesta Hess
Lala Dittenber
Doris Updegraff
Hazel Johnson
Barbara White

and to:

Robert Ellsworth, Keeper of the Records
of Oak Grove Cemetery

Many Thanks!